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POPE APPEALS FOR IMMEDIATE CEASEFIRE IN ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR

Pope Francis in his Easter message said his thoughts went particularly to the people in Ukraine and Gaza, and all those facing war. He called for 'prompt' release of prisoners taken from Israel on October 7 so that humanitarian access can reach Palestinians. "Let us not allow the hostilities to continue to have grave repercussions on the population, by now at the limit of its endurance and above all on the children." | P11

Cong asks ECI to ensure level-playing field in Lok Sabha elections

Opposition leaders at the Loktantra Bachao (save democracy) joint rally at Ramlila Maidan in New Delhi on Sunday | PRAVEEN KHERI

INDIA BLOC LEADERS FLEX MUSCLES, RALLY BEHIND KEJRIWAL & SOREN

PREETHA NAIR @ New Delhi

IN the first joint rally held nearly a year after its formation in Patna, several prominent leaders of the opposition INDIA bloc came together at Delhi's Ramlila grounds on Sunday to protest against the arrest of Opposition chief ministers and the BJP government's targeting of political rivals using central agencies.

The show of strength ahead of the Lok Sabha elections saw the presence of Congress leaders Mallikarjun Kharge, Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi, and Priyanka Gandhi, along with Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav, NCP chief Sharad Pawar, Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray, and Left leaders Sitaram Yechury and D Raja, among others.

While the arrest of Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal has brought parties such as Trinamool Congress and Congress on the same platform despite seat-sharing hiccups, the leaders said the Loktantra Bachao Rally is a mark of INDIA bloc's commitment to saving democracy.

Addressing the gathering, former Maharashtra CM Uddhav Thackeray said it is time for a change. "We are not here for the election campaign; we are here to protect democracy. BJP 'washed' the people who they once called corrupt. How can a party full of corrupt people run government?" he said.

In a searing attack on the government, Rahul Gandhi said it is a clarion call for people to help save democracy. Accusing the Modi government of 'fixing' elections, he said: "This is not an ordinary election. This election is to save the country and protect our constitution. If the BJP wins this election and changes the Constitution, it will light the country on fire," said Rahul.

RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav said there is an "undeclared emergency" in the country.

Echoing similar views, Akhilesh said Kejriwal's arrest has been questioned even by foreign countries.

TMC leaders Derek O'Brien and Sagarika Ghose reaffirmed their party's support to INDIA bloc and asserted it's a fight between BJP and democracy.

Listing out the demands of the INDIA bloc, Priyanka Gandhi said the ECI should ensure a level-playing field in the Lok Sabha polls and Hemant Soren and Arvind Kejriwal be released with immediate effect.

Sunita Kejriwal debuts

Arvind Kejriwal's wife Sunita struck an emotional chord by reading out a letter by the CM from jail. In her maiden speech at a political rally, she asked people whether Kejriwal should resign as CM. "BJP is demanding the resignation of CM Kejriwal. Should he resign? Is his arrest justified? He is a lion so they won't be able to keep him behind bars for long," she said

Will continue fight against graft, says Modi

NAMITA BAJPAI @ Lucknow

HOURS after the INDIA bloc leaders held a mega rally in Delhi pledging support to jailed Opposition leaders Arvind Kejriwal and Hemant Soren, PM Narendra Modi said his 'fight against corruption' will continue unabated. "Modi will not be stopped. Action will be taken against every corrupt person," he said, addressing an election rally in Meerut on Sunday.

Modi said 'corrupt' politicians have come on a single platform thinking they can intimidate him. "They thought Modi will be scared. But it only strengthened my resolve to go against the corrupt more than before," he said.

In a veiled reference to Delhi CM Kejriwal, currently under ED custody for his alleged role in the Delhi excise policy scam, Modi said the corruption charges against some are so serious that they are not even getting bail from courts.

Launching a direct attack on the Congress, he said during its regime, thousands of crores of rupees belonging to the poor, small investors, and banks were wrongfully confiscated. In contrast, the BJP government targeted corrupt people and attached their ill-gotten properties worth ₹17,000 crore, he claimed. He said his government has been relentlessly waging a war on corruption and has removed as many as 10 crore illegal beneficiaries of various government welfare schemes, in the process saving ₹2.45 lakh crore.

BJP TARGETS CONG OVER ISLAND, GOP ASKS WHY NOW

INDIA
SRILANKA
Katchatheevu Island
Mannar Island
Rameswaram
Gulf of Mannar
KATCHATHEEVU IS SPREAD OVER
1.9 SQUARE KM OF LAND
It is about 20 km from India and uninhabited
In 1974, Indira Gandhi government decided to relinquish India's claim over over Katchatheevu
Another agreement was signed in 1976 to define maritime boundaries, economic zones for both countries

RAJESH KUMAR THAKUR @ New Delhi

PM Modi on Sunday blamed the Congress for "callously" givingaway Katchatheevu, an island near India, to Sri Lanka. This move by the Congress has angered every Indian and reaffirmed in people's minds —"We can't ever trust Congress!" Modi wrote on his social media account.

Sharpening his attack, he said, "Weakening India's unity, integrity and interest has been Congress' way of working for 75 years and counting." Reacting to the PM's charges, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge posted, "You have suddenly woken up to the issues of territorial integrity and national security in your 10th year of misrule. Perhaps, elections are the trigger. Your desperation is palpable."

The island was given to Sri Lanka as part of a friendly agreement in 1974, Kharge said, reminding Modi that even his government too had undertaken a similar gesture towards Bangladesh. About 111 enclaves from India were transferred to Bangladesh and 55 enclaves came to India, Kharge said. He questioned Modi on what his government did to take back the island. DMK spokesperson S Manuraj said after 10 years in government, the incumbent party is afraid to campaign on its achievements and is still busy with opposition blaming.

Heatwave: Over 20 kids hospitalised in Ballari

KIRAN BALANNANAVAR @ Ballari

INTENSE heatwave conditions have led to over 20 children below 10 years of age being admitted to hospitals in Ballari district in the last two days. Ballari district has been experiencing temperatures of over 40 degrees Celsius for the last one week.

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has warned that the maximum temperature could touch 45 degrees Celsius this year. Last week, it had issued a heatwave alert across North Karnataka, including Ballari district, which is experiencing intense heat because of drought.

The admitted children are found to be suffering from dehydration, fever and vomiting.

The Ballari district administration has issued a set of guidelines, requesting citizens, especially children and the elderly, not to come out in direct sunlight without protection from 1 pm to 4 pm.

EXPRESS READ

I will retire if what I say on central funds is false: CM

Bengaluru: Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Sunday said he will retire from politics if his statements on funds due from the Union Government to the state are proved false | P4

KSRTC drivers to undergo breathalyser tests

Bengaluru: In a bid to cub accidents, all KSRTC bus drivers will have to mandatorily undergo breathalyser tests at depots and will be allowed to drive only after they pass.

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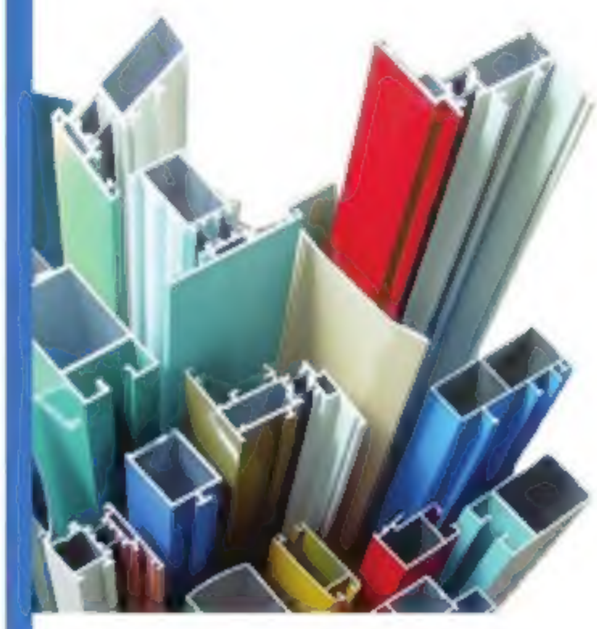

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